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ABSTRACT

This paper describes techniques for bringing the elderly and topics related to aging to children into school settings. Through the participation of older adults in the schools and the inclusion of materials on aging in school curricula, students can develop positive and accurate views of aging and the aged. The first technique discussed is curriculum activities, specifically classroom discussions, role playing, and simulations. A second approach aimed at changing the image of aging involves utilizing the talents of retired persons as volunteers or paid employees in the schools. Older adults can have part-time positions as teacher aides, tutors, visiting teachers, library aides, and playground supervisors. A third approach involves giving students course credit or wages for participation with older adults in home, nursing home, work, or community settings. The author points out that there is a need to evaluate these techniques and programs. Often it is taken for granted that whenever such materials or opportunities are presented, they automatically result in an improved image of the elderly in the minds of young people. However, some research shows that this is not warranted. (Author/RM)

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SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS FOR FACILITATING POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD THE ELDERLY

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Abstract

This paper describes programs that have attempted to bring the elderly and topics related to aging to children in school settings. Through the participation of older adults in the schools and the inclusion of materials on aging in school curricula, attempts have been made to facilitate positive and accurate views of aging and the aged. Among the approaches discussed are: (1) curriculum activities on aging; (2) programs utilizing older adults as volunteers or part-time teachers in the schools; (3) programs designed to provide students with contact with elderly people in the community; and (4) experimental research-based approaches designed to change students' stereotypic and negative attitudes toward the elderly. The need for careful evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs is emphasized.

Schooling has two coequal goals:
productive learning and mutuality
in living.
--- Sarason & Doris (1979)

The need for including information on the elderly and the aging process in the schools was emphasized two decades ago at the 1961 White House Conference on Aging. The policy statement for this group stated,

> Education for aging is related to each aspect of aging and is part of the lifelong learning process...The initial stimulation of education programs for, and about, and by aging, should be through institutions that have public responsibility for education, that in combination, have nationwide coverage and that have the confidence of all groups. These institutions are (the) public schools...[1]

Since that time, attempts have been made to facilitate positive and accurate views of aging and the aged through the participation of older adults in the schools and the inclusion of materials on aging in school curricula. Although there has been a great deal of research on the aging process and older adults, many educators and researchers in education remain unaware of the programs that have been designed to include such material in elementary and secondary schools. The present paper will describe and compare such attempts, as well as discuss some of the problems involved in evaluating their effectiveness with regard to attitude change.

An important factor in preparing young people for responsible adulthood is attitude development. Studies have indicated that many children and adolescents have negative attitudes and erroneous information about the aging process and older people (Powell & Arquitt, 1978). A negative view of aging and the elderly would appear to be dysfunctional for a young person who, with the passing years, must increasingly

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[1]White House Conference on Aging, Special Staff on Education and aging. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1961.

come to terms with the inevitability of living as an elderly person. As Kastenbaum and Durkee (1964) have noted, with a lack of consideration of oneself as an aging individual, one "...runs the risk of ramming into old age as though it were an uncharted reef" (p. 249).

The importance of education for aging is further enchanced by statistics that indicate that the number and proportion of older people in this country are rapidly increasing. In 1900, 4% of the American population was 65 or older; by 1978, the proportion had increased to almost 11% (Barrow & Smith, 1979). It has been projected that if the present birth rate is maintained, those 65 and over will comprise over 20% of the population by the beginning of the next century (Neugarten, 1974). In order for this growing group of older adults to have optimal conditions in which to live, they must have a social environment that is accepting and supportive. Since children and adolescents are part of this environment, their stereotypes, whether positive or negative, are likely to influence the self-definitions of older persons.

TYPES OF PROGRAMS

There have been many different approaches designed to introduce students to the world of aging and the elderly. A comprehensive review of all of these programs is beyond the scope of this paper, but the following overview will attempt to give the reader an understanding of the types of approaches that have been attempted.

Curriculum Activities

While some schools have introduced into the curriculum material on aging and the elderly, no generally recognized and approved pattern for elementary and secondary school systems has as yet emerged. However, the publication within the

last five years of curriculum guides on the subject, such as, Views of Aging: A Teachers' Guide (Cameron, 1976), the Handbook for Curricula on Concepts of Aging (California State Department of Education, 1977), and Curriculum Activities on Aging (Schmall & Benge, 1977), have begun to have an impact on curriculum planners. Among the activities suggested in these guides are:

1. Discussion -- A well-planned discussion can be an excellent technique to teach concepts related to aging. An organized discussion can provide the teacher with information about the attitudes, knowledge, and needs of students in this subject area. It also allows students to confront their own feelings and attitudes concerning the aging process and old age. An increased awareness of these attitudes may result in more positive and realistic views about aging. In order for optimal discussion to take place, the instructor should try to assure that the specific topics are relevant to the students' present lives. A discussion of old age divorced from the everyday realities of being young will probably have little positive effect.

2. Role Playing -- Role playing can help students develop an understanding of what it is like to be an older person. Situations to be role played might include the physical and emotional aspects of health, housing, income, and widowhood. Students are asked to act as they feel the person being role played would act; the class is instructed to observe the situations, and specific points to look for during the role play are outlined. A follow-up discussion is suggested so that students can share and compare their reactions.

3. Simulations -- A promising technique for sensitizing students to the sensory changes that commonly accompany the aging process is aging simulation. In these exercises, students are asked to accomplish a task while one or more of their sensory abilities is limited through artificial means. For instance, the decreased visual acuity and color discrimination which commonly occur with age can be simulated using

folded yellow cellophane placed over the eyes or glasses. Similar simulations may be done for hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Time for discussion of sensory changes before the simulation and follow-up discussions of reactions to the limitations as experienced by the partici ants are suggested. In addition, instructors are encouraged to point out that not all older individuals have impairments to the degree simulated and that many elderly are able to compensate for these impairments.

Other classroom activites such as writing exercises, projects, and panel discussions are also covered in the curriculum guides listed above, and the reader is referred to them for further information. For the purpose of the present paper, the impo tant questons to ask is, "Do these activites lead to more positive and realistic attitudes toward aging and the elderly?" Although the authors of these reports give anecdotal evidence that positive changes do occur, carefully-controlled research on the effectiveness of specific techniques is lacking. We do not know at present which activities, in what sequence or combination, and at what grade levels, produce positive and lasting effects.

In addition to trying and evaluating these techniques, it is clear that educators need to be aware that existing curriculum materials often give negative or stereotyped views of older people. Ansello (1977) examined 656 books designed for young readers. Of these, only 108 (16%) had any elderly characters, and in only 4% was the main character an older adult. Fifty-five percent of the behaviors of older characters in these books were rated as neutral/passive, and less than 10% were action-oriented. Although there were few overtly negative stereotypes of the elderly, the overall impression given by the majority of these books is of the elderly as a passive and almost invisible group. In order to counter this view, the National Institute on Aging

recently published Christopher Wilson's A Treasure Hunt, a book designed to project positive images of older people to young children.

Older Adults in the Schools

A second approach aimed at changing the image of aging involves utilizing the talents of retired persons as volunteers or paid employees in the schools. In these progrms, older adults have assumed part-time positions as teacher aides, tutors, visiting teachers, library aides, and playground supervisiors (Hakanson, 1976). The primary purpose of most of these programs is not necessarily to improve students' attitudes about the older generation. Rather, the main goals are to provide useful work opportunities for retired persons and provide support personnel for the schools. However, in most cases, program goals and descriptions state that it is hoped that the increased contact between young and old will lead to increased understanding and respect between generations.

There are numerous examples of such programs across the country. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, senior citizens served as volunteers in an art-centered project in the elementary schools (Brahce, 1975). These volunteers worked in the classroom as support teams to foster the development of constructive and creative skills in students. The children worked on a one-to-one basis with an older adult on an art project of their choosing. Senior citizens served as models for the children and taught them skills gained from many years of experience. According to the program directors, besides acquiring artistic skills the children learned about the realities of aging and developed a respect for the abilities and talents of older people (Brahce, 1975).

In a study of preschool children in Oklahoma, it was found that most young children had negative attitudes toward the idea of growing old and toward older people (Powell, 1974). As a result, a program was designed to make available the expertise of adults over 65 as teachers of history in preschools. Click (1976) assessed the children's perceptions of older adults both before and after the eight weeks of contact using the Perceptions of the Aged Test (PAT). Although there were no significant differences between test scores on the two occasions, the author's interview data indicated that the children made predominantly positive comments about the older adults with whom they had interacted in the classroom. It may be that young children do not generalize well from the personal contact to the global concept of "old people." The overall conclusion, however, was "that continuing intergenerational contacts may help young children develop friendships with and positive perceptions of older adults" (Powell & Arquitt, 1978, p.423).

Student Contact with Older Adults in the Community

This approach involves giving students course credit or wages for participation with older adults in home, nursing home, work, or community settings. The most widely-publicized of these is documented in Eliot Wigginton's Foxfire books, the first of which was published in 1972. This project sent high school students into the communities of the southern Appalachian region to interview and document the skills of their grandparents and other older adults. The primary purposes of the experience were to familiarize the students with the lives of older people and to preserve in written form the skills and cultural heritage that were in danger of dying. Although there was no formal assessment of the impact of this contact on the attitudes of the students, it is apparent from the written accounts that an admiration and respect for the elderly and their knowledge was achieved through the program.

Several studies have examined the effects of student contact with the elderly in an institutional setting. Gordon and Hallauer (1976) examined the separate and combined effects of a course on aging and a friendly visiting program in which college students spent one hour per week for 12 weeks interacting with elderly residents of a health care facility. The Kogan Old People (OP) Scale (1961) was administered before and after contact. The results indicated that the course alone led to significantly more positive attitudes, and the friendly visiting in addition to the course had an even greater positive effect. The friendly visiting alone, however, did not significantly improve students' attitudes.

Wallach, Kelley, and Abrahams (1979) studied the effects of using high school students as volunteers for one semester to enrich the lives of elderly residents of a nursing home. Students interacted with residents in both one-to-one and group situations. Results indicated that there was increased social interaction, increased mobility, and reduced daytime sleeping among the elderly residents as a result of the program. No assessment of attitude change among the students was conducted, but the authors reported that the structured discussions with students revealed that the young people" ... gained knowledge and a perspective of the aging process and in some cases a career-orientation toward gerontology" (Wallach et al., 1979, p. 470).

An Experimental Program to Modify Students' Perceptions

Labouvie-Vief and Baltes (1976) conducted an intervention program designed to modify the perceptions adolescents held about the elderly. In a pre-test, female high school student volunteers were asked to simulate, on a personality questionnaire (Jackson's Personality Research Form), the response pattern of a typical (but hypothetical) elderly woman. Each student was then randomly matched with one of ten elderly women who also took the personality inventory and were asked to answer

the items in reference to themselves. The largest discrepancies between the two groups were found to exist on the Aggression, Dominance, and Nurturance scales. In order to determine whether the discrepancies between the way students perceived the elderly and how the elderly perceived themselves could be reduced, a program was then designed to train the students to respond to these scale items in exactly the same way as the matched elderly person had responded. Increased accuracy of perceptions was found during a post-test for the most misperceived personality dimension (dominance) both immediately after training and after two weeks in a delayed post-test. No significant increase in accuracy was found for the aggression and nurturance dimensions, and the researchers therefore concluded that the training was only partially effective.

THE NEED FOR EVALUATION

It is clear from this overview that a wide variety of school-based programs for facilitating positive attitudes toward the elderly have been tried. As previously mentioned, however, many of the attempts to present information on aging or contact with older people have not included an evaluation component. Often it appears to be taken for granted that whenever such materials or opportunities are presented, they automatically result in an improved image of the elderly in the minds of young people. However, such a conclusion is not necessarily warranted, particularly in light of such results as Ivester and King's (1977) finding that more frequent contact with grandparents had no significant effect on high school students' attitudes toward the elderly.

When evaluation attempts are carried out, researchers should be encouraged to use instruments with demonstrated reliability and validity, such as Kogan's OP Scale.

In several of the studies noted above, the success of the program was judged on the basis of impressions culled from selected observations of students' or supervisors' writings and comments. While such informal or anecdotal evidence is valuable, the problem of researcher bias in sampling and interpreting such information is a clear threat to validity.

Even in those cases in which a reasonably valid instrument and a pre-post design are used, however, it is difficult to rule out all confounding factors. For instance, in the Gordon and Hallauer (1976) research mentioned previously, the combined effects of a course on aging and a visiting program produced attitude change in a favorable direction. However, the students probably knew the general purpose of the research, and their responses on the post-test may simply have reflected what they thought the researcher wanted to find. The demand characteristics of this type of research must therefore be taken into account when evaluating the effectiveness of programs.

Finally, as Kogan (1979) has pointed out, there is a need to determine whether attitudes toward the elderly are related to behaviors toward the elderly. While some studies have noted a change in student attitudes toward older adults as a result of a particular program, the important question is whether or not there is any congruence between these attitudes and specific behaviors. While a more realistic and positive view of the elderly is a step in the right direction, the key criterion for success will be an improvement in the actions of the young toward the old.

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